

Hepatitis C (Viral)

FACT SHEET

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is an inflammation of the liver that is caused by the hepatitis C virus. This inflammation can result in serious liver damage. Eighty-five percent of hepatitis C infected individuals develop chronic hepatitis. Hepatitis C is now the major reason for liver transplantation in the United States.

How common is hepatitis C?

This year alone, some 30,000 Americans will become infected with hepatitis C in the United States. If the body does not clear the virus in six months, the infection is said to be chronic. Currently, an estimated 4 million people have chronic hepatitis C in the United States. Missouri is estimated to have 95,000 persons infected with hepatitis C.

Each year, 8,000-10,000 Americans die from complications of hepatitis C. The death rate is expected to triple within the next 10 to 20 years, exceeding the death rate associated with AIDS.

Who is at risk for hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a bloodborne pathogen, and is transmitted primarily by large or repeated direct percutaneous exposure (direct skin puncture). Injection drug use accounts for greater than 60% of chronic infections.

Other risks include:

- Blood transfusion or organ transplant recipient prior to 1992
- Occupational exposure (health care workers)
- Hemodialysis patients
- Practicing high-risk sexual activity (multiple partners, history of STDs, co-infected with HIV)
- Using non-injection illegal drugs (intranasal cocaine)
- Tattooing and body piercing with contaminated equipment
- IV drug use – even just once
- Sharing personal items such as razor, toothbrush, water pic, nail clippers
- Recipient of blood products (human albumin or clotting factor concentrates) prior to 1987

Transmission between mother and baby has been documented, although the risk is low, no more than 6%. Breastfeeding does not appear to transmit hepatitis C.

What are the symptoms?

Some people have loss of appetite, tiredness, nausea and vomiting, vague stomach pain and jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes). Some people do not have any symptoms.

How soon do symptoms occur?

Symptoms may occur from two weeks to six months after exposure but usually within 6-9 weeks. These symptoms are during the acute phase of the disease. Liver cirrhosis and permanent liver damage from hepatitis C may not be evident for up to 20 years after the initial exposure to the virus.

When and for how long is a person able to spread hepatitis C?

A person with hepatitis C is contagious one or two weeks before symptoms appear and during the entire time the person is ill. Until more is learned about this disease, all persons who have been diagnosed as having hepatitis C should be considered infectious (able to pass the hepatitis C virus through their blood and body fluids).

What are the complications of hepatitis C?

Eighty-five percent (85%) of persons infected with hepatitis C develop chronic hepatitis and remain infectious to other people. Cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) can occur within 2 years of the onset of infection in at least 20% of persons with chronic hepatitis C. Risk for chronically infected persons to develop liver cancer is 1-5%. The course of illness is influenced by various factors, especially alcohol consumption.

Can hepatitis C be prevented?

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

A healthy lifestyle can reduce chances of infection. Avoid illegal injection drugs use, intranasal cocaine use and contact with other people's blood. Practice safe sex and limit sexual partners (a monogamous relationship has the lowest risk for acquiring hepatitis C). Avoid sharing razors, toothbrushes, pierced earrings, needles and syringes with anyone; and make certain needles for body piercing and tattooing have been properly sterilized. You cannot contract hepatitis C by casual contact – kissing, hugging, sneezing, coughing, and shaking hands. There is no need to prevent the hepatitis C positive person from attending work, school, or daycare.

For those who are infected, avoiding alcohol and use of street drugs can be reduce damage to the liver caused by HCV. Consult your physician about any medications you may be taking. Vaccination against hepatitis A and B is recommended, since a liver compromised by hepatitis C is more susceptible to damage when co-infected with other viruses.

How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

Blood tests can be performed to identify individuals who have the hepatitis C virus. Your doctor can perform these tests.

Is there a medical treatment for hepatitis C?

Yes. Combinations of two compounds, interferon and ribivirin, have been shown to be effective for certain patients. The recommendations for which patients should be treated are changing as more is learned about this disease. Contact your physician for information about the current treatment guidelines.

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